

men complain of lists coming round six or seven times in the course of a single week. In this way they constituted a formidable tax on the earnings of the more thoughtful men who were trying, honestly, to keep themselves afloat, and yet were called upon to assist and keep others whose advantages were equal to their own, and whose thoughtlessness was proverbial. This system was found at last to be such a drag on the men that I believe it formed the real reason why the society was first formed. I think a similar reason may account for the formation of a number of kindred societies. I think so long as the funds of the societies are administered entirely by the contributors, and they are not interfered with in the management, they are not only not objectionable, but in a great degree laudable, and that they act as a useful auxiliary to the proper benefit societies. If only 10 per cent. of the men afterwards join the proper benefit societies these little organizations cannot be said to exist in vain. I would like to call the attention of the Commission to this: that if any attempt is made to bring these societies under the cumbersome machinery of the present Friendly Societies Acts, which are clumsy, dilatory, and horribly vexatious, the probability is that the bulk of them will go out of existence. It is something more than absurd that a little organization which receives perhaps thirty or forty sixpences a week and a few smaller sums, which seldom has £20 in hand, and which generally distributes all this money in sick-pay almost as rapidly as it receives it, and at the end of the twelve months if there is any balance divides it, should be called upon to furnish elaborate reports, to go through all the formality and delay which attend the registration of the rules, and to be continually called to order whenever it is necessary to make some slight alteration, because it is only when the society gets into working-order that little matters are found out which require amendment. I am perfectly satisfied that the extinction of the societies will not be in the interests of the parties themselves.

4. *The Chairman.*] You would, however, draw a strict line between societies such as you speak of and those in which men are either compelled to join or in which the employers take a decided position of influence?—Most certainly. I have not met with any societies of that kind except, of course, the cases of the Union Company, the Sugar Company, and others, of which I have read, but of which I have no actual personal knowledge. I have not met with any case in Christchurch in which pressure has been brought to bear upon people to compel them to join. It has been reported to me that in one establishment the membership was compulsory some years ago, but I am satisfied that it is not now, and has not been for some years. I do not know that there is any particular advantage in raking over the past.

5. *Hon. Major Steward.*] There have been instances in which membership has been made compulsory at the request of the men themselves?—There has been a similar feeling amongst the men working in large establishments when the more thoughtless of their comrades persisted in the course they were following, and I have heard suggestions made that membership ought to be compulsory. I remember some proposals being made, not in the formal and proper way, but in informal conversation, amongst the men in the “Zealandia” Factory. I always opposed it.

6. *The Chairman.*] If legislative enactment could be brought into being which would allow these societies to be registered very nearly on the lines they now are, so as to put them in a position in which they would have more control over the funds, specially where the funds are allowed to accumulate, do you see any objection to such legislation?—No, provided it was made easy of application and adaptable and rapid in its action. The action of the present Friendly Societies Office is frightfully slow. I have known a case in Christchurch where a society has been formed, has applied for registration of its rules, has waited and waited in vain for eighteen months, and afterwards dissolved without ever receiving an answer as to whether their rules were to be allowed or otherwise.

7. *Hon. Major Steward.*] I think it ought to be provided in this way: If a society applies to be registered, and submits its rules, it ought to be allowed to go on until the department has something to say to the contrary. Do you concur that that should be so?—Yes, provisionally. But if any attempt is made to register these societies the system must be inexpensive, rapid, and easy.

8. *Mr. Fisher.*] The Chairman put the only question I wished to put—that was, as to the distinction to be drawn between societies like the “Zealandia” sick benefit society, where the members exercise the whole control over the operations of the society and its funds, and those where the company or firm exercise the largest share of the control over the society and its funds?—Yes, there must be a very wide line of distinction drawn there. There are no features in common between the Union Company’s benefit society as I know it and the “Zealandia” society. They are totally dissimilar. It would be well, I should suggest, in any draft rules and regulations made regarding these societies to take particular care that the preponderance of representation falls into the hands of the actual workers themselves, and that the official staff, though they might be represented, and probably have a reasonable claim to be represented, are not represented in such numbers as to outweigh the representation of the members of the society.

THOMAS TITUS ROBINSON was examined on oath.

9. *The Chairman.*] What is your business?—I am a compositor in the Christchurch Press Company.

10. There is a benefit society attached to the business, I believe?—Yes.

11. Are you an official?—I am secretary.

12. Have you a copy of the rules?—Yes; these are the rules as first framed [Exhibit 29].

13. Are they still in force, without any material alteration?—There have been one or two alterations—one rule has been struck out.

14. *Hon. Major Steward.*] It does not state the amount of funeral benefit?—A resolution has been passed that it should be £10. The number of members has increased during the last three or four years, so they have made a limit of £10, and each one has to pay in proportion, and the amount, of course, is supplemented by the Press Company.